

# Relevance of the National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) Approach to Statistical Development in Africa

Antoine Simonpietri<sup>1</sup> and Tony Williams<sup>2</sup>

## Summary

*The most compelling evidence of the relevance of the NSDS approach to Africa is that the approach was born in Africa. NSDSs have their roots in the Addis Ababa Plan of Action for Statistical Development in Africa in the 1990s (AAPA). Making the transition to evidence-based policy-making and improving statistical systems can best be achieved through designing and implementing a demand-driven, user-focused national statistical development plan. This was recognised by the authors of the Addis Ababa Plan and remains true today. An evaluation in 2001 of statistical development in Africa found that the AAPA had not achieved the scale of improvements needed in statistical capacity. Lessons have been learnt and NSDSs face both a more favourable and a more challenging environment for statistics. A good strategy, adequately funded and successfully implemented can lead to a step increase in the performance of the NSS and help those countries trapped in the vicious cycle of under funding and under performance to break free.*

## Key words

*PARIS21, strategic planning, national statistical systems*

## 1. Addis Ababa Plan of Action for Statistical Development in Africa in the 1990s and its implementation

The AAPA was prepared by the UN's Economic Commission for Africa because, by the end of the 1980s, the level and quality of statistics in most African countries had deteriorated over the previous decade due to a variety of factors. The objectives of AAPA were comprehensive, including to improve awareness of the importance of statistics among users and to improve the timeliness, quality and relevance of statistics produced in African countries. The AAPA stressed the need for demand-driven, user-focused national statistical development plans, referred to then as Needs Assessments and Strategy Development (NASD). The AAPA and subsequently a strategy for its implementation were adopted by the ECA Conference of Ministers in May 1990 and April 1992 respectively.

An evaluation in 2001 of statistical development in Africa in the context of the Addis Ababa Plan of Action found that the AAPA and its strategy for implementation were both excellent and the Plan had many achievements against a background of new or heightened challenges for Africa, such as HIV/AIDS, poverty and conflict. But in many countries statistical systems remained weak and vulnerable with insufficient budgets, under-staffing and low staff morale; and with generally poor co-

1: Manager, PARIS21 Secretariat, Rue Andre Pascal, 75775, PARIS Cedex 16. e-mail address: [contact@paris21.org](mailto:contact@paris21.org)

2: Senior Advisor PARIS21 Secretariat Rue Andre Pascal, 75775, PARIS Cedex 16. e-mail address: [contact@paris21.org](mailto:contact@paris21.org)

ordination and leadership of the national statistical system. In most cases no formal and systematic mechanisms had been established for assessing the requirements of data users.

The evaluation noted that:

- The Addis Plan had not been effectively followed up or publicised, popularised and owned by stakeholders within countries and lacked government commitment
- Policy and decision-makers had not recognised the strategic importance of statistics and NSOs were largely marginalised in national policy formulation
- A number of countries had produced national statistical development plans but generally these were not sufficiently flexible to address the new challenges and did not tackle institutional/organisational issues, or attract increased resources for statistical capacity building
- Although donor programmes played a key role in keeping important statistical activities running in a number of countries, they focused mainly on immediate data needs rather than longer term statistical development and not all donor assistance had been well coordinated between donors

The evaluation team recommended:

- Persuading key stakeholders about the strategic importance of statistics in relation to African development, including through statistics "champions", and making better linkages between statistics and development policy
- National statistical development plans should review legislation and consultation and coordination mechanisms as well as putting in place appropriate institutional and human resource policies and adequate financial and material resources
- Donor support for national efforts in building up systems and capacity should be driven by overall national development plans and provided through coordinated, predictable, simplified and harmonised financing

The evaluation team noted the potential for the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (PARIS21) to become a partner in developing an evidence-based culture for setting and monitoring policy and developing well-managed national statistical systems.

## 2. Higher profile of statistics

The late 1990s and the early part of the 21st century have been marked by the emergence of what is both a more favourable and a more challenging environment for statistics. Compared with the beginning of the 1990s, the decade targeted by the Addis Plan, there is now greater emphasis, both by developing countries and by the international community, on evidence-based policy-making including the need to focus development efforts on measurable results. There is now stronger demand for statistics to provide a basis for measuring and monitoring the development goals, targets, and indicators set out in countries' Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRSs) and in the internationally endorsed Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); and there is more focus generally on governance and accountability of governments, including by a more demanding media and civil society in Africa.

In many countries, the processes of preparing PRSs or other national policy frameworks have provided an important opportunity to identify data gaps and weaknesses and to highlight the priority areas where investment and improvements are needed. But, as observed in the evaluation of the Addis Plan, despite stronger demand, resources for statistical devel-

opment have not expanded sufficiently to meet those increased policy needs. National statistical systems are generally still not well equipped to meet these requirements; and the countries that need good statistics most are among those with the weakest information systems and least able to afford them. Careful decisions need to be made about how best to develop statistics most effectively and efficiently and reform is often required across the whole national statistical system. A strategic, prioritised and realistic approach is needed and the participatory approaches of Poverty Reduction Strategies provide valuable insights into how strategies for the development of statistics should be prepared and implemented.

This was highlighted at the second international Roundtable on Managing for Development Results, held in Marrakech, Morocco, in February 2004, which stressed the importance of strategic approaches to statistical development, integrated with other major development concerns. The Marrakech Action Plan for Statistics set a target for all low income countries to have national strategies for the development of statistics by 2006 and to have started to implement them by the following year. The aim was to support the design, management, monitoring, and evaluation of national policy frameworks and to have high-quality, locally-produced data for the next major review of the MDGs in 2010.

### 3. Status of statistical strategies

Most countries already have a statistics plan in one form or another but, as observed by the AAPA evaluation, in most cases these were not sufficiently flexible to tackle new challenges and did not put in place the institutional/organisational changes, nor the increased resources needed to build capacity and sustain improvements in statistical systems and outputs. For instance, a baseline assessment of the status of statistical strategies in Anglophone Africa completed in May 2005 found that 15 out of 22 countries had a statistics strategy or master plan. But, despite the existence of the plans, the PRS review processes of most of the countries concerned still identified serious weaknesses in their statistical systems. Further analysis showed that fewer than half of the plans covered statistics produced by the key line ministries of health, education and agriculture. The baseline assessment also noted that most plans identified the need for reforms to statistical legislation and governance arrangements for statistical systems, and these take time to change.

### 4. National Strategies for the Development of Statistics (NSDSs)

The PARIS21 Secretariat has produced guidelines for national strategies that drew on the experience of African and international partners, including from statistical improvement programmes such as implementation of the IMF's General Data Dissemination System (GDDS) and through the design and implementation of national statistical development plans funded for instance through the World Bank's Trust Fund for Statistical Capacity Building and STATCAP, an IDA lending facility for statistical capacity building; as well as from national and bilateral donor supported programmes. The guidelines envisage the development of an NSDS as a carefully managed, dynamic and consultative process. The process is often at least as important as the strategy itself in order to: raise the profile of statistics, involve stakeholders, build government and donor awareness and commitment to improving statistical services, build a shared vision and ownership of statistical improvement programmes, change perceptions and develop understanding of modern management practices.

The design process will vary from country to country but typically the process starts with building political commitment and planning of the NSDS design process (a "road map"). This is followed by an assessment of the current situation with respect to user needs, existing statistical systems and outputs and organisational arrangements. This would be drawn upon

to develop an agreed vision for the future of the national statistical system and strategies for how to achieve the vision, including action plans coupled with realistic assessments of resource needs, which fit within the PRS timetable and funding framework (where these exist).

A good strategy will take account of, and build upon, what is already in place and in progress in each country. In this way, the NSDS is not another initiative. It is a consolidation and strategic improvement of all existing activities. The NSDS can provide the much-needed coherence framework, which may take many forms depending on the stage of development of each statistical system and their needs and perspectives. The value added of the NSDS approach is that it:

- Draws on existing best practice in statistical planning and improvement, covering the whole national statistical system, building on the UN Fundamental Principles for Official Statistics, good practice in technical cooperation, and existing statistical assessment and improvement processes
- Incorporates lessons learnt about inclusive, participatory development processes such as from the development of Poverty Reduction Strategies
- Follows best modern practice in organisational development and management

The NSDS approach looks at statistical capacity building through a development and management lens; and looks at development policy and optimal management practices through a statistical lens – all in pursuit of better development results.

Some countries have already demonstrated that statistics can be improved through a national strategy for the development of statistics that (a) covers the whole national statistical system, (b) is integrated into national policy and resource allocation processes and (c) is included in the policy dialogue between developing countries and donors. Statistical capacity building plans can cover the whole of the national statistical system or be sequenced to focus on specific areas of priority need. In some cases strategies have concentrated initially on organisational issues; others have been concerned with priority subject areas such as poverty monitoring. But, however action plans are focused, the strategic planning process and priority setting should be positioned within the context of the whole national statistical system. One good example is Mozambique where, prior to the mid-1990s, development was held back by conflict. Mozambique has a strategic plan covering the period 2003-2007, which is linked closely to their national poverty reduction strategy (PARPA). Long-term donor-supported statistical development programmes have focused on the national statistical institute (INE) but with a wider perspective of supporting development of the whole national statistical system (SEN) through INE. Another is Uganda, where the initial focus was on firmly establishing the semi-autonomous Uganda Bureau of Statistics, which is now extending its corporate plan into a strategy for the entire statistical system.

## 5. Conclusion

The relevance to Africa of the NSDS approach is that this can make a key contribution in the transition to evidence-based policy-making and in improving national statistical systems. NSDSs are needed now in Africa at least as much as Needs Assessments and Strategy Development (NASDs) were in 1990. Experience has demonstrated that a good strategy backed by government commitment and strong leadership, which is adequately funded and successfully implemented, will make a big difference to the performance of a national statistical system and help those countries locked in the vicious cycle of under funding and under performance to break free.

## References

ECA (1990): Addis Ababa Plan of Action for Statistical Development in Africa in the 1990s

Enock Chinganda, ECA: Towards improving official statistics in Africa for the International Statistical Institute session in 1999.

ECA (2001): Assessment of the implementation of the Addis Ababa Plan of Action for Statistical Development in Africa in the 1990s (ECA/DISD/CODI.2/11).

Multilateral Development Banks (2004): The Marrakech Action Plan for Statistics, Second International Roundtable on Managing for Development Results.

PARIS21 Secretariat (2004): National Strategy for the Development of Statistics (NSDS) Documentation, [www.paris21.org](http://www.paris21.org).

PARIS21 Secretariat (2005): Measuring up to the measurement problem, the role of statistics in evidence-based policy-making, prepared by Chris Scott, London School of Economics

PARIS21 Secretariat (2005): Status of Statistical Strategies in Anglophone Africa, baseline study prepared by Mary Strode